

How Did Christianity Begin?

Mike Bird on Paul

Bird's reading of Paul is, to be fair, quite commonplace. But he says some things that simply must be challenged. For example, he writes in connection with the portrayal of Paul in Acts, '... Luke wants to show the role of Paul in the spread of Christianity from Bethlehem to Rome' (p. 87). That sounds nice but Acts never mentions Bethlehem. Mike is importing into Acts a concern it doesn't share. Indeed, if Acts is portraying the spread of Christianity anywhere, it is from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth, neatly bypassing and completely ignoring the early life of Jesus (and everything but his ascension, to be precise).

In connection with Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, Bird observes '... explanations about what really happened to Paul are fanciful and imaginative. All we can say is that something happened to Paul on the Damascus road and Paul himself described it as a moment when God revealed his Son to him' (p. 87). But of course Paul never shares his testimony, Luke shares it for him. Bird has previously noticed that Luke varies the tale in each telling, which is what has forced Bird to withdraw to the sensible position that the above quote indicates in the line 'all we can say...'. That's the sort of caution that has been needed in Bird's work throughout. Indeed, when he writes a few lines down 'We either believe Paul or we don't...' could equally well apply to the other authors of New Testament texts. And should. Unfortunately Bird isn't as consistent as he should have been in this connection.

Mike spends a good bit of space discussing Paul's relationship to the Law, but Crossley has done a fair enough job in pointing out the problems here that I'll leave it aside.

When it comes to his discussion of Paul's view of the divinity of Jesus, though, a particular weakness in his argument comes to the fore. Like many, he misinterprets the Aramaic phrase 'marana tha'. As Casey had observed in connection with Bird's discussion of the Aramaic phrase translated 'son of man', Bird's evident failure to read Aramaic cripples him. The same is the case here. Bird writes of 1 Cor 16:22, 'That final phrase 'Our Lord come!' is transliterated from the Aramaic marana tha where mara stands for 'Lord' or 'Yahweh' (p. 95). This is, however, simply wrong. As Theodore Bibliander noted long ago (and who, by the way, was followed by Calvin and Luther as well as Bullinger)

In Aramaic Marana tha has the same meaning as the Hebrew term קרם, (ban) and means, therefore, Our Lord ban Thee!

The verse then reads, quite sensibly of course, 'Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord. Indeed, may our Lord ban (them)! Popular Christian misreading has trumped sound exegesis, however, for many readers of this text and Bird too has fallen victim. What sense, after all, does it make to say 'Let those be accursed who don't love the Lord. Come on back, Lord!?' Much more reasonable is the exegesis provided by the Reformers. And, as an aside, it must be mentioned for those who have no familiarity with Theodore Bibliander, that he was a brilliant and gifted linguist who knew the biblical languages inside and out.

In general, Bird does a better job with Paul than he had done with the Historical Jesus or the Resurrection. But this is the case because he has rightly noted that when it comes to Paul, one must either believe him or not. That is the approach he should have adopted earlier. Next, we see whether that's the approach he adopts for the Gospels.